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MEMORANDUM

TO: Chairperson and Members
Boston School Committee

FROM: Thomas W. Payzant
Superintendent

Thomas W. Payzant

SUBJECT: MCAS

DATE: January 12, 2001

The purpose of this memorandum is to provide the School Committee with a framework for discussion of issues regarding MCAS. Since its conception, MCAS has been viewed as a work in progress for the State Board of Education and the Commissioner of Education who have controlled the implementation while being receptive to improvements.

While I do not believe that this is the time to eliminate MCAS as a graduation standard, I do believe that it is necessary and valuable for Boston to discuss ways to make best use of this assessment in service of our long-range goal of educational success for all of our students.

Background

With the publication of "Focus on Children" in August 1996, the Boston Public Schools acknowledged its commitment to standards-based reform and outlined the essential components of the reform effort to "improve teaching and learning to enable all students to achieve high standards of performance." The key components include clear expectations for what students should learn aligned to the state curriculum frameworks; a strong curriculum; assessments aligned to the standards and curriculum; professional development to improve instruction; a whole-school improvement strategy focused on student achievement and clear accountability; a broad-based literacy effort; and increased use of technology to support effective teaching and learning.

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FOCUS On Children
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In our continuing discussion of MCAS, we must re-affirm our commitment to accelerate our standards-based reform efforts so that we can enable all students to achieve high standards of performance.

Why is Standards-Based Reform so Important?

Standards-based reform is a vehicle to ensure that Boston's students have the knowledge and skills necessary to access opportunity beyond high school. Examining the relationship between our strong economy and the middling performance of students throughout the United States, Marc Tucker, President of the National Center on Education and the Economy, explains, "It's not that schools are doing worse than in the '40s or '50s or '60s... If anything, they are somewhat better. The problem is, in an era of globalization our economy has steadily shed jobs that would formerly support less-educated, lower-skilled workers in a middle-class lifestyle."

A recent study conducted by Massachusetts INC reached the same conclusion: jobs are demanding higher skill levels and employees unable or unwilling to acquire new skills will be left out.

The current generation of students must reach higher standards than any previous generation to gain access to continuing education and good jobs. There are fewer safety nets to catch and support those who do not.

Why is there a Need for the MCAS?

The MCAS is a key element in the state's overall educational reform effort. Irrespective of its use as a graduation requirement, there are certain characteristics of the MCAS which make it a unique and valuable tool for our standards-based reform efforts.

First, this curriculum-driven assessment instrument, based on the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks and Assessment expectations, incorporates a combination of an extended-essay, open-ended, short-answer and multiple-choice items. This range of response formats gives students different ways to demonstrate their knowledge and skills relative to the state's Curriculum Frameworks and Boston's Citywide Learning Standards.

Second, a key feature of the MCAS is the state's release of actual test items each year. This is important for a number of reasons. Public release of test questions ensures broad review and critique of the skills and knowledge being assessed. Through careful review of student work on specific MCAS items, teachers can enhance their instructional practices and content coverage. Since teachers, parents, students and community agencies all know what students are expected to know and be able to do, the possibilities for productive collaboration are increased.

Third, the MCAS should be viewed as a decent measure of whether a student is prepared to participate in college level course work. An editorial in the *Metrowest Daily News* (March 16, 2000) cited comments by University of Massachusetts President William Bulger and Northeastern University President Richard Freeland that the extended composition is similar to the assessment they use for freshmen to determine if they enter college-level or remedial English classes. These university presidents also indicated that the MCAS taps skills such as the ability to solve complex math problems and write concisely what Massachusetts' high tech employers are looking for among new hires.

Finally, the detailed aggregate and student level reports provide tools for student, school and district accountability and planning and also allows for the measurement of progress overtime.

What are the Key MCAS Issues?

As with any assessment, there are important MCAS issues that need to be addressed.

1. *Is MCAS a good test?*
   The test is designed to assess what Massachusetts students are expected to learn based on State Curriculum Frameworks. It is one of the most rigorous State tests in the country. It has a good mix of open-response and multiple-choice questions. It provides lots of information for educators to use to improve teaching and learning and for parents and the public to gauge how the schools are doing.

   There is unevenness among the tests. Alignment is critical. In English/Language Arts the alignment is strong and the expectations about reading, comprehension and writing are clear. Recent changes in the math frameworks will require school districts to make some modifications in curriculum. I believe the State Board's action to require students to pass only English/Language Arts and Mathematics as a graduation requirement makes sense.

   Recent modifications in the science and social science frameworks have resulted in some confusion for school districts and questions about alignment. The new science standards have just been released and careful review is necessary before drawing conclusions. There is still widespread disagreement about the social science frameworks.

2. *Are the standards students are required to meet reasonable and fair?*
   The State Board set standards based on scale scores for each of the four performance levels. A score of 220 or above is required for students to meet the graduation requirement in 2003.

   The best evidence of what is reasonable is found in the examples of student responses to open-ended and multiple-choice questions. A review of examples of students' writing which meet the passing standard will lead most reviewers to the conclusion that students who cannot meet this standard will not have access to opportunity beyond high school.

   There is, perhaps, more disagreement about the impact of the recent changes in the State math frameworks on curriculum alignment and how much time it takes to make sure that teachers are teaching and students are learning what is expected before it is fair to use the test results for high stakes.

3. *What is the right amount of time for MCAS testing?*
   The consensus among educators is that the State's initial expectations for the number of subjects tested and the amount of testing time required for each subject was excessive. The State Board of Education has responded with a plan, beginning this year, to spread the testing over grade levels to require students to pass only English/Language Arts and Mathematics to graduate in 2003.

   The flexibility in the amount of time students have to complete the test is viewed as a strength. However, when student take more time, this may be seen as contributing to too much testing.

   One of the strengths of the MCAS is the inclusion of open-response questions. Students must write long and short compositions. They must write and diagram explanations of how they solve math problems. This takes more time than responding to multiple-choice questions. It is important to keep the balance between multiple-choice and open-response items in order to preserve the strength of the test and the data it generates. The timely availability of results also is affected by the types of questions included in the test. Clearly, open-ended responses must be graded by readers who are well-trained in scoring which is labor intensive, while multiple-choice results can be graded by machines quickly.

4. *Should high stakes be attached to MCAS?*
Most people don't like high stakes tests. However, tests with stakes attached are a reality: a newcomer to America must pass a test to qualify for citizenship; drivers must pass both a multiple-choice rules of the road test and a behind-the-wheel performance test to get a license; most employers require applicants for skilled jobs to demonstrate proficiency as a condition of employment; a volunteer for military service must pass a test to join the military; teachers must pass a test to become certified, and most colleges require students to demonstrate proficiency in reading, writing and math. There are many other examples.

Is it reasonable to expect students to demonstrate a given level of performance in reading, writing and math to qualify for a high school diploma? I believe the answer is "yes," if they have had a fair opportunity to learn what they are expected to demonstrate on the test. This requires adults to provide support for students, and it requires students to put forth the effort required to learn and achieve.

Most people take tasks more seriously if there are opportunities or consequences attached to them. This is generally the case with tests. If the teacher says, "This won't count on your grade," most students won't study or take the task as seriously as if it does count.

MCAS results are helping create an understanding of the gap that exists between what students know now and what they must know and be able to do to continue their education beyond high school. The high stakes component of the MCAS has heightened the sense of urgency to accelerate the rate of improvement in schools and school districts to make the changes necessary to close the gap.

There is a legitimate question about when it is fair to implement the high stakes aspect of assessment.

5. *Should there be a different standard for limited English proficient, disabled, or vocational education students?*
Students who expect to access opportunities for continuing education and good careers beyond high school must meet high standards. It is important to have that goal for limited English proficient, disabled, and vocational education students, too. However, there must be recognition that some accommodations are necessary to reflect the appropriate use of MCAS, particularly for students with the most severe disabilities and for students who are recent immigrants and have limited English proficiency. Many such students are capable of meeting MCAS standards with the proper instructional support to prepare for the test and with accommodations in the test setting.

6. *Should a single test score be used to determine whether a student graduates from high school?*
Most test experts and educators believe that the use of a single test score for high stakes purposes is inappropriate. That is why multiple opportunities to re-take a test are provided in most cases when high stakes tests are used. This is the policy with MCAS.

It is important to remember that students must also meet other requirements to qualify for a high school diploma, e.g., taking and passing the required number of courses in specified and elective subject areas. A student who does not meet these requirements will not earn a diploma, but there are opportunities to keep trying and to meet the requirements.

Recommendations for Modifications of MCAS

1. A decision to eliminate the requirement to pass MCAS in English/Language Arts and Mathematics as a condition of graduation for the class of 2003 should not be made now. Data from the regular 2001 and 2002 administration of the test and re-takes should be analyzed. Based on these analyses, the policy should be reviewed in late 2002 or early 2003 to determine whether more time is needed before the graduation requirement is implemented.

2. Until there is greater statewide consensus and clarity regarding the State's Social Science Curriculum Frameworks, MCAS testing in this subject should be postponed.

3. MCAS tests in science should be aligned with the new Curriculum Frameworks. Until this occurs, results from current MCAS tests should not be used by the state for accountability purposes.

4. One way to increase the validity of the MCAS as a graduation requirement is to re-design the instrument for "re-takers" so that most of the items are geared to differentiating between those students who have just mastered sufficient skills and knowledge to pass the MCAS from those who have not yet mastered the requisite skills and knowledge. Creating a different assessment also would address the concerns of those who believe that graduation decisions should not be based on a single test. The Department of Education is considering this approach.

   This focused MCAS would be administered in late fall or early winter of students' 11^{th} grade and 12^{th} grade years. During the spring of the 11^{th} grade year and the 12^{th} grade year, students would take the traditional MCAS. Thus, students who do not pass the MCAS in the spring of their 10^{th} grade year would have a total of four opportunities to demonstrate that they have met the MCAS graduation requirement.

   As proposed, this procedure would be both reasonable and fair. However, in order for this re-test procedure to work effectively, the State must get the results to school districts and schools earlier.

5. Students with Disabilities, English Language Learners and Vocational Education Students

   Generally, all students should meet the standards reflected on the MCAS language arts and mathematics tests. However, there is a need to consider specific accommodations for some disabled, limited English proficient and vocational education students.

   Students with Disabilities: Recently, the Massachusetts Department of Education announced it would consider offering Certificates of Attendance for students with disabilities who do not pass the MCAS. I believe we need to proceed with caution down this path. Historically, students with disabilities were not required to take district or state mandated tests and results were rarely reported for purposes of measuring progress or accountability. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act mandates that students with disabilities be included in district and state assessment plans, and results must be included in reports used for accountability and/or measuring school and district progress. I am concerned that creating a certificate of attendance may be regressive. Schools and districts should not be provided with an across-the-board "out" for students with disabilities. The IEP process – which requires school-based staff engagement and parental review – should remain the vehicle through which individual student needs are addressed.

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Vocational Education: Students enrolled in vocational programs must master academic content to be successful on the MCAS, and they must master the content and skills required of a particular industry. There is widespread agreement that the language arts and mathematics skills assessed on the MCAS are necessary for success in today's workplace. However, for some students, achieving industry certification and passing the MCAS may take additional time. I propose the district work, in partnership with business and higher education leaders, to develop a 5th year vocational course of study for students requiring additional time to meet the academic and industry standards necessary for success.

Limited English Proficient Students: Students who spend three years enrolled in school in the United States are required to pass the MCAS. For the vast majority, I believe this is achievable. However, some students arrive in our schools with gaps in their formal schooling and low skills. For these students, more time may be necessary to learn both the content and literacy skills required to pass the MCAS. I propose that on a case-by-case basis, such students are identified by the district and are provided with additional time to meet the MCAS requirement. There should be further discussion about the development and use of additional native language MCAS tests.

6. Support to students who do not pass 10th grade MCAS

I propose developing targeted support plans for every 10th grade student who does not pass the mathematics or literacy MCAS examination this spring. Plans will focus on providing additional academic support – including additional instruction during the school day, after-school and on Saturdays – to prepare students to re-take and pass the MCAS. Plans must ensure that academic support is built into City and Private Industry Council sponsored summer employment opportunities. Further, the district must draw upon parents, community partners, the higher education community, volunteer tutors, the 2-6 Initiative, and our business partners to ensure every student has access to MCAS focused academic support.

7. Resources

When the Education Reform law was passed by the legislature, a commitment was made to provide additional resources to support implementation of reform. However, it was clear that an assessment and accountability system would be implemented to determine the progress being made in raising student achievement and establish responsibility for results.

We must have additional resources to provide more support for students who must accelerate their rate of achievement to meet the standards and pass the MCAS. I believe we must continue to make strong persuasive arguments for additional resources and recognize that without continuing support for the accountability component of educational reform we will be in danger of losing the additional resources necessary to improve teaching and learning for all students to ensure that they have opportunities for success beyond high school.

I look forward to discussing MCAS issues and proposals for modification of MCAS implementation at your January 31st School Committee meeting.

TWP/mjc/MCAS-sc